

## **WHAT'S WRONG WITH EAS?**

If you think “Jaws” is a story about a big fish with lots of teeth and a bad attitude, you need to go back to video store or the library. The real monster in “Jaws” isn’t the shark. It’s the local government officials who put their own greed and ambition over the welfare of the people they represent.

While the broadcasters of Amity Island are required to have Emergency Alert System equipment, there’s no mandate that Mayor Vaughn and others like him have to use EAS, or that those broadcasters have to carry the warnings. If there were, “Jaws” and a lot of other movies would have different endings.

But back in 1996, the FCC wound EAS up like a beach toy, threw it on the sand and walked away. While only three states implemented EAS by the deadline of 1 January 1997, nothing happened the other 47 who were left to founder on the shoals marked “Not My Job”. What washed up when the tide went out was an erratic warning system that worked in some places and withered in others.

EAS was supposed to be the broadcast industry’s Cold War bonus....developed from ‘60’s technology for a New Millennium industry, another of those oxymoron-ic, Federally-mandated, unfunded projects supposedly made more palatable by the addition of the adjective “voluntary”. But EAS went to the bottom of broadcast priorities because it cost money, took up inventory and didn’t bring in revenue. Now that the New Millennium is here, the FCC has decided that the digital television industry and the emerging digital radio industry should be exempt from EAS.

While you will hear a lot of specific recommendations on the Notice of Proposed Rule Making from some of the best minds in the broadcast business, the biggest problem with EAS isn’t listed in the NPRM....it’s the attitude we have as broadcasters about our role in the Emergency Information Business. The first step has to be the decision of whether we broadcasters are going to continue to be in the Emergency Information Business. If so, then the FCC or DHS is going to have to give us some teeth. It’s not enough to mandate that broadcasters carry all emergency warnings. There also has to be a mandate that emergency officials have to use the system.

If the decision is made to continue with EAS or some “son of---“ derivative, then broadcasters need to move EAS out of the back room. As the Late, Great Guru of Civil Warnings, Stanly Harter, used to say, “EAS is too important to be left to the engineers.” But that’s what we did, and while the broadcast industry grew and morphed, nobody noticed that engineers moved away from the microphones. While they are still seen as the repository of everything EAS, very few stations have an engineer in the building 24/7. That means when the tones go out, nobody really knows what’s going on.

As a result, well, the stories are legend...The two Texas news anchors who reported that the AMBER Alert had been used to warn people to not pick up pieces of the Space Shuttle Columbia. Or the reporter who wanted Sheriff Charles Moose to use the AMBER Alert to issue warnings about the DC Sniper.

You can bet those News Directors thought it was still called E-B-S and the GM's thought that once the EAS equipment was installed, it could be set to Auto-Forward and everything would all take care of itself. That was how the equipment manufacturers billed their products, and we bought the line, hook and sinker.

It's not enough to install and maintain the equipment and run the tests. Broadcasters have to make a commitment to the system. We need to train everyone on our staffs. And then we have to reach out to our local, regional and state officials, to make sure they understand that EAS is here for them and it doesn't cost them a dime to use and that local radio, television and cable are still the single most effective means of reaching the largest percentage of people in our community.

We have to decide if the next generation of EAS should create the clones, drones and 'droids needed to make up for the human who's not at our automated stations, so somehow after the activations are generated, that the information is repeated and the crawls are produced, and by the way, can someone please produce this technology for a price of less than three thousand dollars? And as they did with CONELRAD and EBS and EAS, broadcasters will find a way to cope and to pay for the next generation of EAS.

It is important to note that while the FCC has heard our complaints and this NPRM is the response, they haven't been the only ones listening. The public officials who sat down at the recent National AMBER Alert Conference were all too aware that EAS isn't perfect.

But they aren't waiting for us to fix the problem. With few objections from the broadcast industry, they ended the conference by putting broadcasters in the back seat. Justice Department officials advised the attendees that someone from their Attorney General's office should be in charge of the AMBER Alert program. And that program is now being built around the so-called "new technologies" instead of EAS—things like cell phones, text messages, pagers, the Internet, e-mail, lottery terminals, and of course, those highway message signs that the public seems to think are the heart of the AMBER Alert.

This is the legacy we have as a result of turning EAS into a burden. We are at the crossroads now, where we must decide if EAS is worth saving, or if it's worth our effort, energy and expense to build a new system, or if, in the interests of consolidation, automation and inclination, that we get out of the way and let someone else do the heavy lifting of warning and informing our community.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the sharks are circling.....

Adrienne Abbott-Gutierrez  
Nevada Chair  
State Emergency Communications Committee